



'There is always light'

There is so much that is good in our personal relationships and community capacities to help those in need that we can be reassured about living. But there is also so much that is black and murky grey to deter or confront us. This introduction to the PCNV newsletter feels unusually hard to write. Is optimism justified without a sufficient base in reality? Does being discouraged show we lack vision? There is war in Ukraine that assaults all notions of humanity. In Australia 'natural' disasters from fire and flood cause great suffering – and people respond with warm-hearted care. The numbers of displaced people and asylum seekers reach new records. The virus infection may be increasing again in Australia and is still killing thousands daily in poorer parts of our world. Nationally there is not enough political will to deal with climate change to earn international respect - to say nothing of assuring us our children will inherit a liveable environment. An encouraging view seems to require some delusions.

What do our little efforts to focus on the positive, hopeful aspects of Christianity that are about the Way of Jesus for a better world now matter? The Roman military executed Jesus but small groups lived the Way of Jesus and eventually outlived the Empire. So for us living uncaringly is not an option. Living caringly is to be part of the light.

I read again what Amanda Gorman, America's youngest Poet Laureate at age 22, wrote for the inauguration of President Biden in January 2021 soon after riots that invaded the centre of political life in Washington and shocked the nation:

When day comes, we step out of the shade of flame and unafraid.

The new dawn balloons as we free it.

For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.

If only we're brave enough to be it.

Amanda Gorman. Jan. 10, 2021. Updated Jan. 20, 2021

**Coming at the PCNV meeting on
Sunday 27 March
at 4.00pm by Zoom**

**"Afterlives:
Jesus in Global Perspective"**
with
Rev Drs Greg Jenks,
Lorraine Parkinson,
David Cohen and
Rod Pattenden

Details at:
www.pcnvictoria.org.au/events/upcoming-events/

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The death of Bishop John Shelby Spong on 22 September 2021 at the age of 90 years touched the lives of many people who remembered with gratitude the ways his many writings opened new windows on a contemporary Christian Way. One especially helpful and challenging tribute expressed positive implications for how we live.

John Shelby Spong Final Words

A three-fold exhortation is recognizable as quintessentially Spong. It distills the results of his research, writing, and interactions with people and states how the Christian story still called him to be a follower of Jesus. It was his mantra. He often concluded his books, lectures, interviews, and sermons with it. And he wanted it read at his funeral. It is an epigraph he would have us write not on a plaque near his gravesite in the Memorial Garden of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Morristown, New Jersey, but on our hearts:

*I invite us all to walk today in the shadow of
death and to find there a new commitment
to live, to live fully; a new commitment to love,
to love wastefully; and a new commitment
to be all that each of us can be.*

*Then I call us to dedicate ourselves to the building of a
world in which every person has a better opportunity to
live more fully, to love more wastefully, and to be more
deeply that which each of us is created to be.*

Simply put:

Live fully

Love wastefully

Be all you can be.

Andrew D. Scrimgeour, *Bishop to the Church Alumni Association. The Life of John Shelby Spong 1931 – 2021. The Fourth R.* January-February 2022. Westar Institute.

“The task of religion is not to turn us into proper believers; it is to deepen the personal within us, to embrace the power of life, to expand our consciousness, in order that we might see things that eyes do not normally see.”

- Bishop John Shelby Spong

Lloyd Geering: The World to Come From Christian past to Global Future

What then will this new faith, the religion of the future, look like? It is far too early to tell, but some broad outlines can be seen. I suggest that being religious in the global era will be:

- to be devoted to maximizing the future for all living creatures whose destiny is increasingly in our hands;
- to place the needs of the coming global society before those of our own immediate family, tribe or nation;
- to develop a lifestyle consistent with preserving the balance of the planetary eco-system on which all living creatures depend;
- to refrain from all activities which endanger the future of all species;
- to set a high value on the total cultural legacy we have received from the past and which enables us to develop our potential to become human;
- to value the importance of the human relationships which bind us together into social groups and which enable us to become fully human;
- to promote the virtues of love, goodwill and peacefulness.

These general principles do no more than set the parameters of a global spirituality. For its detail, the new faith will need to draw on the cultures of the past, allowing for both the universality and the diversity of a rich global culture. There will not be 'only one way' of being religious (as Christian exclusivists love to assert) but a great variety of ways. There will not be one religious organization operating globally, but rather a host of relatively small and somewhat diverse social groups, in which the members are bonded to one another on a personal basis. But if religion is to flourish in the global era, these groups must learn to be inclusive; they must be ready to welcome anyone wishing to join them and, even in their diversity, they will need to acknowledge a broad set of common goals and values, such as concern for the earth's future. Exclusivity, whether religious or ethnic, will be damaging to the future of the human race.

How much or how little of the traditional religious ritual and terminology is retained in new, transformed religious forms we cannot predict. That will depend on how ready people are to reshape their spiritual inheritance in response to the new global culture, for in the coming global era, new terms and concepts will be created, along with new rituals and patterns of social behavior. As Don Cupitt says: We do not yet have any global religious vocabulary.' In a future that draws on the diversity and richness of our past cultures, we should not expect one set of symbols and concepts to provide the 'religiously correct' language of a global religion. Each culture must be free to draw from its own tradition, but always in such a way as to direct it towards the needs of an ecologically sensitive global society. There is no one religious symbol or concept from the past which it is essential to retain for the spirituality of the global society, ...

We are coming to the end of the Christian era and find ourselves standing on the threshold of the global era. We are living through a fragile stage of social, cultural and religious transition, as we move from being primarily members of tribal society to learning how to find our place in a new kind of society, the global society. In the world to come we humans find we are dependent wholly on our own inner resources, yet not so much individually as collectively. The challenges which lie ahead cannot be overcome by any one person or group working on their own but only by the human species working as a whole. ... What we can do individually is to hope for it, try to visualize it, and do our utmost to bring it to pass. ... The realization of the global society will require from the whole of humanity creative thinking, self-sacrificing endeavor of the highest order, and all the mutual goodwill of which we are capable.

Lloyd Geering, "The world to come. From Christian Past to Global Future". 1999

Those who seek the common good

At a time when many people in NSW and Queensland are grappling with overwhelming loss and disruption to lives as they were, we see with fresh eyes the people who step up to help, to do what is needed to care and support people with disrupted lives. Poems of Glynn Cardy read at a PCNV meeting invite us to see with fresh eyes

- *Blessed are those unheralded souls who slip*
- *tangentially into situations,*
- *coaxing forth possible solutions;*
- *and who, on the edges, help and restore.*
-
- *Blessed are those who seek the common good*
- *even when it's not their own;*
- *caring for those who don't care for them,*
- *caring for those who can't or won't be good.*
-
- *Blessed are those who've learnt and give*
- *empathy*
- *without needing reciprocity,*
- *without needing recognition or reward.*
- *They emanate contentment; like angels.*
-
- *Blessed are those tireless encouragers,*
- *who see the best in the worst,*
- *who see the light in the cracks of our lives,*
- *who lead us, guide us, bring us home to our*
- *heart.*

-
- *Blessed are those brief moments of gift,*
 - *when the serendipitous slips into the sacred,*
 - *when a lucky coincidence becomes*
 - *a strange warming of the heart.*
 -
 - *Blessed is the hand there to be held and*
 - *the one holding, both on to the life that flows,*
 - *in, through, under the expected, hoping...*
 - *as the beeping monitors serenade.*
 -
 - *Blessed is the untimed arrival of a friend,*
 - *sitting, watching, serene, presence as prayer,*
 - *wordlessly knitting a sacred garment of*
 - *moments*
 - *past with moments present.*
 -
 - *Blessed is that bird on the outside sill,*
 - *visiting each day, as if to say, 'Are you okay?'*
 - *No wonder holy spirits are oft ornithic,*
 - *leaving a gift, a crevice in time.*
 -
 - *Blessed are those brief moments of gift,*
 - *when the serendipitous slips into the sacred,*
 - *when a lucky coincidence becomes*
 - *a strange warming of the heart.*

Glynn Cardy

At a PCNV meeting Rev Glynn Cardy, minister of St Luke's, a progressive Presbyterian Church in Auckland, and a noted poet, read a selection of his poems. They evoke awareness of the magic of the ordinary. This selection is printed with permission.

WHAT PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY OFFERS ME

**Edited extracts of an address by David Merritt
to The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria, 28 November 2021.**

Soon after I retired in 1995 I began to read systematically the authors who have made progressive Christian thinking known to many people – Bishop John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Robert Miller, Brandon Scott, Lloyd Geering.... Their books line my shelves and enrich my thinking. Then since 2006 through involvement in the formation of PCNV I have come into more direct contact with progressive Christianity. I have increasingly found the new perspectives both informative and inspirational.

I will refer to just five aspects of progressive Christianity that look good for me

- 1. Progressive Christianity looks to me like a guide to appreciation of the wonder of language and avoidance of the swamps and quicksands that await those who want to take religious language literally – an especially disastrous danger for a religion that has a preference for ancient writings.**

The history of religion through the ages and in our own day is scarred by battles in the swamps of literalism where words from ancient writings are taken out of context as applying to the lives of people today. Think about the recent debates in Australia about same sex marriage and diverse sexualities and how some religious people judge LGBTIQ Australians.

One of the scholars of progressive Christianity said that reading any part of the Bible is like listening to a conversation through a keyhole in a door. You know little or nothing about the speaker or who the audience is, or the circumstances of their lives.

- 2. Another thing I look for in progressive Christianity is the impressive co-operation of large groups of scholars of the Westar Institute to give every new idea thorough examination.**

The scholars of The Jesus Seminar, starting in the last decades of the 20th century and continuing now in the Westar Institute, not only vote on any proposed conclusion to a discussion, but publish the voting results of every major discussion in four categories: Wholly agree, partly agree, partly disagree, wholly disagree. That is gutsy scholarship that appeals to me.

Most books about Christianity give the ideas of one scholar, sometimes drawing respectfully on the previous work of other scholars, but still what that one writer thinks. Many of those books are rightly valued. But to have a source for progressive ideas, ideas moving on into new territory, that is assessed by a group of qualified scholars, adds to its claim to be taken seriously even if it jolts my present ideas – as it often does

- 3. Progressive Christianity looks like a way to appreciate that everything in the human story is a story of change. That ‘progressing; or ‘moving on’ is what we do and what we need to do.**

Some people don't like the word “progressive”. They think it expresses arrogance. It just means “moving on”. Some people prefer “Open Christianity”. That is okay with me – open to new ideas, moving on. Some people prefer “Emerging Christianity”. That is okay with me, Emerging fresh ideas and practices” – just keep moving on.

Even our Bible begins in the first two chapters of Genesis with two very different stories of beginnings that show the effects over centuries of the myths and religion of ancient neighbours of Israel and Judah. The Bible isn't a Book but a collection of at least 66 different writings from between 20 and 30 centuries ago. They tell stories of dramatic changes in ideas and practices over a thousand years.

If such different stories were needed or appropriate centuries ago after centuries of new knowledge and different experiences, how much more do we need new stories of beginnings and life itself after another 25 centuries which have included Copernicus and Galileo, Charles Darwin, John Newton, Sigmund Freud,

Einstein, the discoveries of DNA and the human genome, rockets exploring the planets of our solar system, and a new space telescope that will see to the beginning of time. The catalogue of what is new seems unending. I look to progressive Christianity to speak to me in this new world.

We need, as John Shelby Spong titled one of his influential books, *"A New Christianity for a New World"*.

4. I especially look for progressive Christian scholars to help me understand and experience the dynamic story of the impact of a young Jewish man named Jesus whose teaching was so disruptive that the Roman Empire executed him. That teaching offered such a new way to live that it attracted followers and is relevant to me.

After extensive examination of hundreds of manuscripts from the first three centuries of our era, the scholars have concluded that there is no historically reliable direct evidence of what Jesus said or did. Instead, we have a variety of memories by people who were good at orally transmitting memories as stories and teachings. Those memories of Jesus were strong because they changed people's lives so much that they met in small groups to help put the new ways of living into practice in societies dominated and damaged by the military might of the Roman Empire.

The Westar Institute scholars also concluded that there was nothing that could be called Christianity (a system of beliefs and practices and organised leadership) before the third century. There were many groups of Jesus people. Some of the Apostle Paul's letters were about how to deal with problems in diverse and unruly groups he had founded!

In our New Testament there are three stories of good news memories of Jesus written by unknown writers none of whom knew Jesus at first hand, none of whom had met him or heard him teaching. The names by which we now know those writings were not part of the original manuscripts but were added later using respected names. And the resulting pictures are vivid. Take for example the two writings we know as "The Gospel According to Matthew" and "The Gospel According to Luke".

Matthew was written around 55 years after the execution of Jesus. The unknown author wrote for a community of mainly Jewish Jesus people somewhere in the vast Roman Empire. The writer had a copy of the "Mark" manuscript as he quotes a good portion of it, and a collection of Sayings of Jesus – a tribute to their influence. He added some very Jewish stories about Jesus' birth, including that Jesus escaped to Egypt with his family so that he came back from Egypt (like Moses). And "Matthew" invented a family tree, a genealogy, for Jesus that traced Jesus back to Abraham. When he introduces a collection of Jesus' sayings, he writes that Jesus went up a mountain and taught people. In a movie this would be the cue for more "Moses theme music". The Commandments on Mt Sinai and the new teachings on a mountain. We often say "The sermon on the Mount". A new teacher in the Moses tradition is announced.

Another manuscript "Luke", was written around the same time as the "Matthew" manuscript, by an unknown writer in a different part of the Roman Empire for a different local community. He also had a copy of the Mark manuscript and the collection of Jesus sayings as he quotes them but sometimes with significant differences from how Matthew used them.

The writer clearly has in mind including a Roman audience while Matthew had numerous Jewish references. He wrote some different stories about Jesus' birth and invented a genealogy that went back to "Adam who was the son of God". He was writing for a wide audience.

Consider the spectacular way the "Luke" manuscript introduces the birth of Jesus.

At the beginning of chapter 2 he refers to the Emperor Caesar Augustus in the lead to the announcement by an angel of "good news of great joy for all the people: "To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is the Messiah, the Lord. .. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" (Luke 2: 1-14').

Perhaps we have become too used to regarding this as exotic Christmas card material. The Westar Scholars have helped us to hear this as it would have been heard in the first century. To hearers in the Roman Empire this was dynamite. Because the Roman 'general' Octavian had brought decades of

bloody wars to an end by defeating his opponents, he had been given sole power by the senators of the Republic of Rome and became the first Emperor of Rome. He took the name Caesar Augustus (the great Caesar). Many tributes referred to him as “*Bringer of peace on earth, Saviour of the world, Son of God, Liberator, Redeemer, Lord.*” (See John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire. Jesus Against Rome, Then And Now.* HarperSanFrancisco, 2007. Pages 106 – 108)

So when the author of the Luke “good news” began his story he used words well known across the Roman Empire. This good news was an alternative to peace by bloody power. It was peace by justice among people of goodwill – a choice of ways to live. It was confronting and political and attractive to people under military occupation.

And “Luke” was strong on stories that sound interesting but end up grabbing you by your morals – the Jesus stories we call parables that often end a direct or implied question about how to live.

So progressive Christianity helps me pick up some of the impact of what Jesus stood for, the memories of a call to a different way to live that connected with both devout Jews and battle weary Romans.

5. If I do not find in progressive Christianity - or something like it - an enticing new Christianity for me to live in this new era of the 21st century - the two commonly available options seem to me to be:

- **leave traditional Christianity as not very relevant, or**
- **become part of churches which focus a lot on ancient biblical writings or an ancient creed.** Who would have thought!

Many Australians have chosen the first option. I would not choose a doctor who announced on his website that he practices medicine based on the first four centuries of our era.

A progressive Christian, Robin Myers, wrote recently about the changes he sees in USA:

“The fact is that organized religion of almost every stripe is declining and graying across the board. It’s an equal-opportunity disappearing act, and it’s complicated, except for one universal thread. The young are leaving religion in droves. Four out of ten younger millennials (eighteen to twenty-nine) are “nones” (no religious affiliation). That is four times higher than it was in 1980. “In fact, the fastest-growing religion in America is . . . no religion at all.”

A similar trend is shown by the Census in Australia. That is why I look for stimulus from progressive Christianity.

So finally, what progressive Christianity looks like for me is a way to live fully in today’s world – a world in which knowledge is growing exponentially in every sphere of human endeavour. A world where I hear and welcome many voices from other religions and secular wise women and wise men who speak about the challenges we need to address. And the way to live that Jesus stood for - as told by progressive Christianity - is a strong influence on me. It is about love, inclusion, and collaboration for a better world.

Rev Dr David Merritt is a retired Uniting Church minister who served as Executive Director of The Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand.

***Wherever you are on your spiritual journey,
wherever you’ve come from,
wherever you’re going to;
whatever you believe, whatever you do not believe;
you are welcome here.***

Rev Dr Margaret Mayman, Welcome to St Michael’s Uniting Church, Melbourne